



**THE SECRETS  
OF ISHBAR**

Poems on Kashmir  
and Other Landscapes

**SUBHASH KAK**



# The Secrets of Ishbar

Poems on Kashmir and Other Landscapes

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*(with Georg Feuerstein and David Frawley)*

# The Secrets of Ishbar

Poems on Kashmir and Other Landscapes

Subhash Kak

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PART I

*Snow in Srinagar*



## *Exile*

Memories get hazy  
even recounting doesn't help  
I need to look at pictures  
or listen to music to remember  
and sometimes walking through narrow lanes of my town  
a sudden perfume escaping from a window  
halts my steps and I am transported  
to my childhood years.  
What other memories live behind the barred doors?

I hear the girl next door calling out;  
I do not answer because her stern father  
is watching from the balcony.  
Many scents mingle in the courtyard,  
the autumn breeze touches lightly on my skin.  
Women are pounding grain in the giant mortar,  
our hen is guarding her brood  
from the mean street mongrel.

And now we glide through a water passage  
over pink lilies, reeds, and rushes  
against the curtain of sleek houseboats  
moored to banks with soft green grass  
with willow trees guarding the edge of water  
and giant chinars shading higher ground.  
Blue kingfishers flash across water  
and yellow orioles dart from tree to tree  
and now we pass a quince orchard  
with blossoms of delicate pink  
and a field of brilliant yellow mustard.

We stop at a clearing  
where a girl is selling honey  
and as we talk the sounds of cows and calves  
sheep and lambs  
geese and gosling  
ducks and duckling  
chicken and chicks  
children singing tables from a canalside school  
men coughing on their hookahs  
float by.

The best paradise  
is the paradise we are exiled from.

## *Reaching Srinagar*

As the dusty bus crosses the Banihal tunnel  
the air becomes scented and zippy  
and the passengers break out into a loud cheer.

We strain into the distance  
to see where Verinag might be  
to begin tracing Vitasta's course.

At Kazigund we order egg paranthas  
and now the driver races through—  
Kashmiri songs blaring on the radio—  
Khanabal, Bijbehara  
the ruins of Avantipura  
the saffron fields of Pampur  
and then to the kulcha shops further on.  
It is quite dark when we reach Srinagar.

We wait in a corner as father gets our holdalls and trunks  
and we climb aboard the tonga—  
horseshoes flashing in the dark  
against the asphalt of the road.

## *The City of Fame*

It was called Sharika's town until king Pravarasena  
moved the capital here from old Srinagar.

An embankment separated the town from the Dal.

This Sathu had orchards of apple trees:  
the water flowing to the Vitasta from the Dal  
is the Apple River.

The goddess Sharika as a sparrow  
brought her mountain near the town:  
from the Hari Parvat one can see  
Haramukh, Mahadeva, and Tatakuti  
Nanga Parvat in the north  
many vistas of gardens and water.  
Near is the rock of Ganesh  
and old temples that are in incarnations  
of a new faith.

On the other side is Gopadri  
the hill with Shiva temple atop.  
From here we see the river snaking on a side  
floating gardens  
countless waterways  
islands in the lake  
the city of fame  
of seven bridges  
now seized by madness.

## *Rainy afternoon in Chashmashahi*

Everyone has heard of the astonishingly sweet  
waters of the Chashmashahi spring  
and the picnicking families  
samovars steamings  
or tea being made on primus stove  
and young people exchanging glances.

But who has spent days in rainy August  
in a leaky house above Chashmashahi?  
The water did not stop for a week  
and we shuddered in our blankets  
in the only dry corner of the room.

The mountain slope and the lake looked desolate  
as more bricks of Parimahal were washed away.  
I did not understand a word of the relativity book  
that I held in my hands.

## *Up the Sindh River in a Doonga*

It was dark when the doonga arrived at the Apple River  
food, stoves, rugs, and blankets were loaded  
beds were made in the dim lights of kerosene lamps  
and soon we lay down to the sounds of the poles against the  
sides  
that pushed the boat  
past the shadows of other boats,  
watercress and asparagus.

While we listened to stories of the cousins  
and some singing of the girls  
father called out the stages that were crossed:  
passing under the city's bridges we reached Shadipur  
and then pushed against the current of Sindh.

The boatmen were up before us next morning.  
Ropes were anchored to the boat  
and towed from the bank to make the climb easier.

By evening we were at Ganderbal.  
Rented tongas took us to the magic spring of Tulamula.  
We set up camp under a chinar tree  
and played under the lights to the singing of the worshipers.  
We peered into the water to check its colour  
to know the future  
but layers of flowers prevented this  
so we did puja, ate luchis and nadroo fries and rested.



It was a pleasant night.  
Voices around us and singing in the distance  
made us feel secure. We were oblivious  
of the trials that lay before us.

## *Snow in Srinagar*

The radio says it has snowed in Srinagar.  
The first snow is cause for celebration:  
mother lighted the wooden stove in the kitchen  
and unwrapped packets of beans and dried vegetables and  
fish  
to make the feast. And we hurried into the backyard  
dragging our wooden slippers through the snow  
throwing snowballs until it was time to take  
packed boxes of steaming food and gifts  
to the neighbours and relatives to spread merrymaking;  
and we received similar things in exchange.

After our snowfights were over we watched  
from the window the boatwomen hurrying  
across the embankment to the kulcha shop  
and heard the labourers pushing the overloaded carts  
to mutual exhortations  
across the slush of the broken pavement.  
Down a flight of steps  
the samovar was ever ready  
with hot moghal chai and sweet kulchas.

In the evening in the big room,  
wrapped in blankets over our pherans,  
new kangris with painted wickerwork were started,  
and as we waited for father to return from work  
we listened to grandfather's tales  
and the conversation between mother, aunt, and  
grandmother  
from the kitchen.

The dinner done by the faint light of the electric bulb  
we heard the day's accounting  
as the thalis were cleaned with sawdust and ash.  
When my feet were cold  
my father took them under his blanket  
and warmed them with the warmth of his own feet.

Who knew then that decades later a terror will come to  
Srinagar  
and I will be unable to see my home where I was born  
where we had played cowries on many new snows.  
The terrorists want us to bury our past  
forget the deeds of our ancestors.  
We are banished because we remember  
tales that grandfathers told us  
because we remember  
our story.

## *Chilai Kalan*

The pheran, the blanket, and the kangri  
barely warmed the bones during the forty days of Chilai  
Kalan.

The icy air poured in from the drafty windows.  
Each bed was like a tent: we slept completely covered.

When the morning broke we heard the sounds from the  
kitchen  
mother making tea on the smoky stove  
father saying his prayers after his bath in icy water.  
When he had finished it was time to roll up our beds  
and assemble around the breakfast sheet.

There was only one blazing kangri.  
We took turns to cook the coldest part of the body:  
feet, stomach, face, or hands  
and waited anxiously for mother to make hot lunch  
sitting cross-legged at our book desks  
pretending to revise our class notes  
or playing cards made out of cigarette boxes.

In the afternoon the washerman staggered in  
with the pile of laundry on his head.  
And then the middleman with his horoscopes  
seeking mother's advice about suitable girls  
with discrete gossip about many relatives.  
My sisters made countless pots  
of kehva and sheer chai.

It was then that I learned to sit still  
listening to stories about a hundred different people  
perched on my seat wrapped in blankets.  
Visitors gone mother began humming tunes  
as she did her knitting  
and how we longed for spring!

## *Crossing the Vitasta*

As the bus passes by the bridge near the Shankaracharya  
Hill

I must decide on the way to cross the Vitasta to be at our  
new home.

Up Lambert Lane past my uncle's old apartment  
the Bund is full of tourists on a summer evening  
the brides, looking picture perfect in their finery  
with hennaed hands, wearing low saris  
husbands walking stiffly by  
and college girls in groups rushing in and out of stores  
hoping to catch the eyes of young men.

Past the houseboats  
and the handicraft and carpet shops  
where tourists are still buying souvenirs  
one last time before they leave next morning,  
we sip tea in the courtyard at Ahdoo's.  
As the shadows lengthen on the river  
we hurry to the landing  
and cross the river in darkness.

The doongas on the other side are dimly lit  
the beautiful hanji women have suspended their war  
of oaths and curses for the night  
we carefully pick our way across the steep embankment  
through the streets past the chimes of  
the silhouetted temple.

The children are doing their homework,  
father is reading newspaper, mother sends me out  
to buy vegetables as a guest will come to dinner.

## *Journey into the Himalayas*

Remember the embers  
the fire fighting sleep  
the wind springing up like a ghost violated  
the tent beating its elephant flaps  
forgotten maps  
the waters' easy laughter  
you and me  
our intimacy.

Must the tramp stamp his way  
through the pines  
incarnations of our long-lost brothers  
they have waited so long  
that their memory sleeps.  
When they awake  
we shall be deep in slumber.  
remember.

Morning wakes up so languorous  
the smouldering fire in flesh  
the chant of birds  
grass blue with dew  
eyelids flutter and a smile  
floats across the raw air  
let the tin-warming begin  
and then the brushing of hair.



Does a mountain talk?  
Up the paths on the curves  
in the clearings the tumescent earth  
and big broken teeth of rock  
lie here and there  
and beyond the grass and the lichen  
of the lower slopes  
one can see the meditating face  
of the mountain— eyes closed  
noble forehead firm nose  
and during rains one can hear  
the fremitus in its chest.

Have you bared your body  
to some mountain stream  
kissed its froth  
let it rub your back  
and stood free with your friend  
in your large bathing field?  
How haltingly does warmth return!  
And when it has spread  
and we are but names again  
it is time to tread  
the ribbon on the hill.

After the descent of clouds  
the rain comes crashing down.  
The ponies are shivering wet  
their big sad eyes turned inwards  
and a brown field mouse is smelling its way  
back to its flooded hole.  
Will it miss its tribe  
and go searching to the river bank?

Seasons work a magic, the roots  
clutch and drag at the slipping earth  
and join the pine cones and sheep droppings  
and scorpions being flushed down the slope.

Why must water fashion and destroy  
give strength to lemmings on their last march  
the wind dry and freeze  
the sun warm and burn  
the earth support and inter  
why must entropy ever increase?  
And yet new forms scream their beginnings  
in the muddy bloody spring.  
Who will their dirges sing  
who will dig their homes in the slush of snow  
or make them fires in the clearings in the woods?

That light on the hillside is no star.  
The shepherd must be with his wife  
exchanging memories  
for each wears the smells of a hundred days  
butter sweat urine other fluids  
damp of the earth  
curries herbs and smoke.  
Why should he revoke?  
And the camp ever so gently breathes.  
Do you hear the whine of the darkness  
and beard sprouting through the skin?

As the night softly smooths its sheets  
no bears around no fearful sound  
the body lying peacefully on the ground  
why does the mind insist on a second journey  
along the path well-trod by our tired limbs?

Fire and air  
water and earth  
are aplenty on the Himalayas.  
Yet the mind rushes over early ghosts  
school and father  
friends and mother  
car and clothes  
and makes its way to the mountain hospice.  
It is indeed unnecessary:  
we are ourselves  
we are ourselves  
we are ourselves.  
We remember.

## *Ishbar Evenings*

Evening brings you to the magic circle of its sound:  
the chirping of chicks, hens clucking,  
the little stream jumping down the rocks,  
the alarm in the koel's call,  
the muffled footsteps of young girls  
the clang of my grandmother's wooden sandals  
as she shuffles up the incline,  
the ringing bells from the altar,  
the repetition of holy names,  
and the deep call of the boatman  
that echoes from the hilltop.

Sweet, warm smells from the bakery waft up  
and we are served sugared green tea  
with cinnamon, cardamom and almonds  
sitting on rugs in the verandah facing the altar.

The lake begins to prepare for repose  
as the last shikaras slide on the surface  
punctuated by the dull sounds of the oars.

On rainy evenings the water sloshes down  
along new channels down the hill's slope  
and spouts out of a thousand little crevices on the surface  
bringing the boil from the secret chambers of the mountain.  
And I wobble on my wooden sandals  
over deep mud  
to get the corn for our chickens  
shivering as the cold wind gathers  
under my loose shirt.

In the sacred spring the fishes  
prance unperturbed,  
and the crows linger forlornly  
on the ancient stones.  
Birds, fishes, animals on the slope  
have no regrets;  
we are burdened by our old memories.

## *Pony Ride in the Liddar Valley*

Across the wooden bridge  
through fern trees  
the pony walks on the outer edge of the track  
a hairbreadth away from the foamy torrent.

We passed gujars  
on the way to high pastures  
camped on trackside clearings.  
Young boys herded goats,  
skipping amongst the rocks  
they hawked goat-milk cakes.

Beyond the camping ground of Aru  
we followed the stream's course  
through smooth grassy slopes  
full of wild flowers  
till we reached the snowbridge  
of Liddarwat.  
A lone butterfly  
had accompanied us.

## *Views of Haramukh*

There are many views of Haramukh:  
every point in Kashmir  
shows a different face.

We went to Wangat  
near the ruins of the ancient temple  
we camped in the clump of walnut trees,  
by a babbling brook,  
and readied for the mile-high climb.

Before the morning mist had melted  
we took the vertical sheep track  
around wild rose and fern  
resting at each step  
until hours later we came by the birch trees.

At the end of the climb  
Haramukh rose to the left  
dressed in ice  
and we marched to the Gangabal lake—  
pilgrimage to forefathers.

## *My Father in Hawaii*

The gardens in Kaimuki recall childhood dreams:  
water, sand  
black crater of diamond head  
like the mountain over the Dal Lake  
and the little stream behind the apartment  
seems like the shrunken Apple River  
the fence preventing the exploration  
of the lock in its way  
before it meets the big water.

The park atop St. Louise Heights  
with its pine trees  
cool breeze  
and the bowl of Manoa at our feet  
like the clumps of trees  
beyond the clearing of Gopadri hill.

Walking up and down the hillside above our home  
was like a little pilgrimage  
to the goddess of the isles  
a sister to the sparrow goddess  
of our old city.

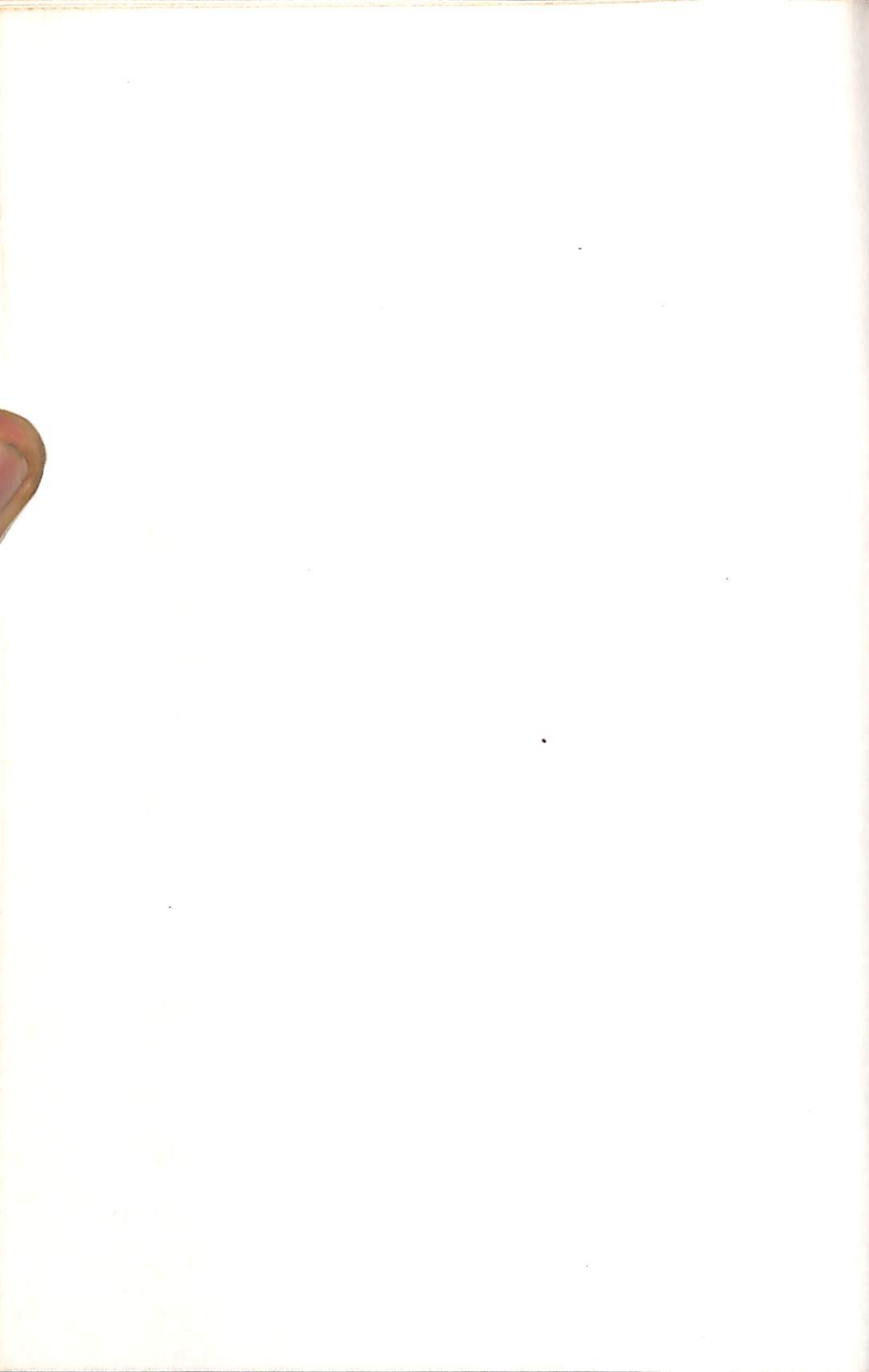
We searched for him  
on Haleakala  
asked goddess Pele  
who breathes fire and lava  
drove over the winding mountains of Maui  
searched again in the beaches at Lanikai  
amongst the surfers at Waikiki



at the reefs of Hanauma bay  
on the warrior boat  
pulled by synchronized oars  
returning past sunset.

The children are dazed  
grasping hands  
and a wail—  
deeper than sorrow or regret—  
emerged from the hollow of my heart.

My mother cried for months and said:  
A light joined another light  
in Hawaii.



PART II

*Ten Thousand Years Of  
Solitude*



# *The Fire in the Waters*

1

In the bowl of the mountain valley  
after the arctic storm  
the pipes are frozen  
and the electric wires are down  
we wait  
    expectantly  
for the day to warm  
peeping through the heavy air.

2

I see the farmer's daughter  
walk up the ribbon on the slope  
a pitcher atop her head  
perfectly balanced as she walks  
from the spring to her home.

3

On that frigid wintry day  
the fire in the belly of the spring  
is another sign of life.

4

Inside the hospice  
friends pour  
    fiery arrack  
    or light tea  
our spirits are low  
so we warm our bodies.

5

Later, we walk to the pond  
the surface of this bowl  
is a frosted mirror  
our reflections are shadows  
but we recognize  
a glow.

## *Records of Our Lives*

What do we do with our memories, do we trust them completely, or do we make recordings of each moment we live, and keep a diary for all thoughts? Then we can audit each recall, and if we should forget

or get amnesia, we can go back to the books and relive our days moment by moment refresh any period of choosing.

But what if someone should steal my memories and take my past for his own? Will the thief become my twin or can I sue him for faking his past? But what if he believes his new memories completely?

And how can I be certain that my recordings are accurate and not transposed with some other? How shall we find the truth or does it matter whose memories these are anyway?

On the other hand, if we trust our memories and accept that we do suppress moments of youthful indiscretions

how do we know that what the others say about us is false? Maybe, we broke the law several times so is it best to own up and confess?

Can memories return prompted by the dreams of others or be dredged up by clever psychologists?

Are we responsible for our memories?  
Should they be all nice and clean?  
Can we borrow or buy good ones?  
And if memories don't matter, then how do we define  
ourselves? How is our responsibility  
measured? If our memories are forced  
by those around us, how much of credit  
is theirs? Where is our freedom?



# *Threads*

When feelings are reasoned  
the pain of no-feeling  
soaks you  
the pain  
of no-feeling mocks you  
and your organs burn  
your cells melt  
in that acid.  
Ah must one burn  
in one's own fire?

A question is best answered  
by another question.

I have had the same dreams  
for ten years  
same images have haunted me  
same fears oppressed.

Yogin sits at the balcony  
trying to tell the passersby  
she is lonely  
through telepathy.  
Did I hear her right?  
I must examine the dregs of her tea  
see her picture in a mirror  
measure her shadow  
read my mantra a million times  
over her hair  
yes she is full of desire  
but soon she will tire.

A silent shriek shakes me up  
I see the wraith of the village pig  
I rush to the slaughterfield  
where the pig lies feet bound mouth muzzled  
his screams rend the air  
the four ape-men in loin-cloth do not hear  
they are sharpening their knives  
to make meat for their wives.

I fast this evening  
but instead of communion with the pig's soul  
I let my thoughts roam  
till they stop by Anands's daughter  
sixteen year old worshiper at my temple.  
She is onyx to my touch  
so I tell her of mysteries  
of being and emptiness.

I have so much of desire  
that desire itself is my fulfillment.

## *Ask Krishna*

Why must one choose between  
heaven and earth  
balance yin and yang  
and knowing maya yet desire  
why can't one be both  
here and there  
please this and that  
be calm and angry  
and if that cannot be  
why not be neither here  
nor there?  
Trishanku did it.

We are alive in spite of ourselves  
we have seen torsos breathing  
for legs arms eyes ears  
smell speech  
do not make a man.  
We just exist  
we cannot perceive ourselves.  
Let us not try lifting mounts  
on little fingers.  
It is futile  
speaking of our nature  
ask Godel.

Death swallows the earth  
death swallows the hearth  
the earth buries the dead  
the dead haunt the earth  
the earth gives birth  
like serpents in one circle  
cycles are endless.  
Ask Krishna Buddha Abhinav Gandhi  
or ask the beggar in the street  
or ask me.

# *The Conductor of the Dead*

1

I am not what I look  
I am my ghost.

When I was dead  
my soul was rejected  
in heaven and hell  
and finally driven  
to the refuge of my bones.

2

We are beautiful for we die  
Once time had halted its flight  
one moment was a thousand years  
I was dust, O I was an idea  
how I longed to be again in flesh  
for I haven't felt enough  
not enough  
and when my frozen body thawed  
with the stirrings of life  
it was ecstasy.

3

And speech was born of silence.  
Freedom may be a prison  
yet stillness does not revel  
in stillness  
does not revel  
in the throbbings of a heart

but who wants beauty  
so let me sing a song  
let me roll a stone  
let me chime a bell.

4

I drink defeat everyday like my breakfast milk.  
This morning when I awoke .  
blots of white sunlight dotted my room.  
I scattered my night clothes all around my bed  
yet the plates on the table  
were neatly arranged  
the furniture in the room  
was all in its proper places  
our house in the town was. . .  
I could not eat my breakfast.

5

The birds fled when I came  
I had no knife  
and I offered seed with my hands  
the birds still kept away  
and my arms got tired and I let go.  
The scattered grain sprouted plants  
with little white flowers—  
what a harvest of lilies.

6

The last phoenix  
sailed serenely to the fire  
to burn  
to turn into ashes  
and rise again  
youthful and chaste.

As it neared the fire and closed  
its eyes for the plunge  
it felt itself rudely swept  
away—its throat firmly squeezed  
that sure was no rebirth—  
someone had cut its wings.

The phoenix still lies  
at the same place  
unmoving, unfeeling  
not alive, nor dead  
its life is in its eyes  
that slowly move  
and scan the skies.

The fire nearby  
is long extinguished.

7

I sat on the railing  
warming my bones in the winter sun.  
On my eyelashes the sunbeams broke  
into a million gossamer globes  
and soon ants were crawling all over the place.

They came floating in  
like the fragrance of death  
and ate through my desires.

## *A Wounded Bird*

1

You said I was a bird with a broken wing. I am afraid that when you have nursed me to health I might fly away.

2

The sadness in your eyes haunts me.  
When you have given me life and  
I take my lonely flight (Can I help  
that?) will it not break your heart?  
Why do you breathe life into me, when it  
will be the death of both of us?

3

Do not grieve at my stony face. My  
heart warms to your every smile, every  
touch. I almost feel the strength to  
fly. Shall I get well and lose you?

4

That I love you is clear  
since I ask you for nothing.  
I would love you even if you went away  
leaving my wing bleeding.

5

I feel guilty that my condition  
made you interrupt your play.



No, you have hung around me for many days now, stroking my feathers, dressing my wounds. Can I ever repay you?

6

You have whispered in my ears that I look so weak and wan that you must help me. And what patience! I haven't spoken, you still console me with your beautiful words.

7

Don't you realize that you are wasting your youth on a bird with shrivelled limbs when your garden is full of handsome admirers? They know many clever games to amuse you.

8

I admit I have called you sometimes with my cries.

9

In your absence your image has lain with me. The shadow of your soft hand has warmed my feathers in the cold nights.

10

Shall I get well and live with you in a gilded cage woven by your deft fingers or shall I paint your form on these rocks before I fly off?

## *The Riddle of Isha*

All that moves has a secret:  
the spirit envelops the bones  
and when you yield  
you win without greed.

Regrets of a hundred years  
weigh us down  
unless we know the dance.

We are led to darkness  
if we don't recognize the image  
we saw as children.

That which never stirs  
is very swift  
we can't chase it down with thoughts  
it will stop when one stands still.

It moves and moves not  
its eye surrounds  
reflects  
overpowers with its magic.

This is a strange walk  
to the darkness of the vault  
and when we soar  
the darkness beyond  
the horizon in the west  
is more intense.

If one could journey  
to the secret  
of the smile  
pleasures will come  
without the seed of sorrow  
detachment will fall  
without emptiness.

Can we jump  
beyond the golden disk  
remember the deeds?  
There is  
no other.

# *Patanjali's Song*

## *1. The First Season*

The first season is the provocation to gather  
and to fly,  
we shall yoke our bones  
to see the centre of cyclones  
eye to eye.

Five winds stroke and roar  
and bathe the life on our green  
the plants bear different fruit  
their beginnings were similar though.

At night the cry is enclosed in voidness  
when the eye remembers.

The season mellows into a warm glow  
the leaves rustle to the breathings of the earth.

My equus shakes for me to stroke it to get still  
it has no wish to drink  
I know we have to stop to think  
as we streak through the woods.

There is another gait when we glide  
when I am going with the wind.  
My friends break their horses differently  
but we are all expert horsemen.

You may ride hard or mild  
if you have learned from the master gamesman.  
The master rides unconcerned  
perfect in his knowledge of the season  
and its moods,  
he fills the green with his music  
and word.

We know the harmony of our journey  
as ripe fruits fall  
and a chill creeps upon us.

We run along for warmth  
the lake is almost still  
breathing with its waves.

We feel the pleasant warmth of the season  
the light of joy  
we have seen the dream of the sun  
we know the lesson of the evening  
we have heard the music of the dance.

The reins float  
flowing with the movement of the horse  
like fish in the wake of a powerful ship.

How pure is our memory now  
how beautiful are the flowers  
small and big orchids  
a tribute to the gardener's art.

The winds are hushed  
the season in its golden prime  
the grass is green with gloss  
if this was once a desert  
the first flower must have bloomed in awesome glory.

## 2. *The Garner's Rites*

Gautama bends at the wheel  
clearing the spokes  
of dirt, grease, rust, mud and rain.  
Dust courses about at the prayerfield  
blurring the shine of the car's top,  
crows caw  
and fire leaps up beating against fire,  
the wood crackles.

The wheel moves like a windmill  
turned by the fire  
the garners walk on the circular track  
grinding the earth into fine dust  
beating their drums  
keeping in step with the turning wheel.

Dancing is the first rite,  
the shaft turns  
a little faster now.

The fire leaps up and crawls about  
visible and beyond the flame,  
observed by the priest in his crystal  
it changes colour  
as the rites go on.

The meaning of the song lies not in words  
the singer does not know the language  
he has given the breath.

He now quickens the steps  
he is the seven time master  
of the tournament  
of the eight fold dance.

The first figure is moving back and forth  
lightly gliding.

The second is to swing neatly  
without impeding other dancers  
who may shake after their own fashions.

The dancer sees his own movement  
form a pretty ripple on the wave  
his step appears to force the others  
the energy unimpaired  
movement flowing by its nature.

The ballet's intensity increasing  
the steps in harmony  
faces showing ecstasy  
bodies springing over the ground  
music is the master now  
with its invitation to flying.

The postures hang in the air  
like a galloping horse reined in  
the double causes no torment.

The beat of the drum is unceasing  
and the dancers float about  
with the wheel's revolutions.

There is a lessening of the burden of the bones  
the flesh is fit for gathering  
each garner is like a strong machine  
poised for the flying leap.

### 3. *The Song Of Power*

A shape emerges out of the leavings  
and a current courses through the form  
filling him up with power.

Other shapes now arise  
each glowing in translucent palpitation  
with an unhurried elegance  
their speech is forced  
by their inner power  
it is loud and clear  
their breathing deep.

Forms change  
as currents find new channels  
like water bursting when it is dammed too long  
like trees growing and shedding leaves  
driven by their inner warmth.

The shape utters many animal sounds  
sees own birth  
knows the constitution  
of life  
and lo here he becomes unseen  
moving and listening like the air.

He knows when he will kiss the worms  
his face shows intense feeling.

He is strong like an elephant  
he sees afar  
he has the knowledge of the earth  
of the stars  
of their motions.



He knows the centre of desire  
he can cease hunger  
he can sit unmoving.

He sees his brother within him  
truly he has power  
he has solved the puzzle of the mind  
of the taste of pleasure  
of its essence.

There are more diversions.

He can change his shape  
float on water  
become luminescent.

He has heard the sound of his heart  
he can fly  
emerge in his pristine nakedness  
refine his strength  
to adamant hardness.

He is a great athlete  
master of his body  
he can move it like his mind  
he mirrors things.

Power has many attendants  
and many demands.  
Can we measure the pulse of power  
know its pace and form  
all its moods  
its aloneness?

#### 4. *Flying*

Happiness is a bird flying.

The gardener has grafted peaches on the appletree  
the fruits hang side by side  
the birds feast on them together  
the same ants walk them.

Birds are flying away  
at an unchanging height  
sometimes they vanish in the haze  
sometimes they look like foils  
flying in echelons.

The leader looks like the last  
each held in position by the formation  
always between two movements  
fixed while moving.

Fixity to flying and back to fixity is the law  
but rest and motion are mysteries  
the bird flies  
yet it moves not.

Only space flows  
for a bird cannot see itself  
and reflection can have more reflections too.

The lonely bird takes its place in the flock  
its position so well defined  
so much combined  
that the flock is like one flying monster  
later the bird is again alone.

Clouds may trick our vision  
the lonely bird cares not for hazards  
no sleep assails its limbs  
its flight is full  
its flight-field the sky.

A speck in space  
soon free of its companions  
perfect master of its flight.

## *The Hidden Path up the Hill*

Autumn leaves and broken branches cover this path  
and it breaks off at several places  
winding around huge rocks  
and over little streams  
where one must jump over mossy boulders.

At the end of the climb  
is a bowl-like depression  
with the softest grass—  
sheltered by a huge canopy of branches  
extending beyond the rock edge.

I have spent many afternoons at this cove  
breathing its jasmine air  
listening to the pigeons  
and the gurgle of the rivulet.

The explorers have heard of this paradise,  
they are looking for diamonds  
they will blast their way up.

They will never find it.

## *Inner Sarasvati*

A river named Sarasvati  
dried up four thousand years ago  
in the plains of India  
when the rubble of earthquakes  
blocked its path.

The priests took their chantings to another ford  
and declared  
that the old stream still flows underground.

There is another Sarasvati  
that flows through our minds  
irrigating the inner landscape.  
Will the anger of the demons  
dry up their river?

# *Naming Things*

We seize things and name them  
but the names keep slipping away.

What goes  
is the cow  
the earth  
the sun and the moon  
the rays of the sun.

Each name hides a story.  
Are these stories like dreams  
accounts of other worlds?  
Or are they forgotten tales  
that bubble up in the chambers  
of our memories.

Words soar  
nesting secretly  
with their mates.

## *On High Desert*

It was a summer evening  
the sun had set  
we were still many miles  
from our camp  
in the high desert.

The moon was full  
and the cacti shimmered in the pale light  
until we saw two eyes  
peering from behind the bush.

One eye of the wolf shone fiercely  
the other was calm.

We drove on over canyons  
and through ancient mountains  
till we reached Taos  
still connected to its ancient roots  
and we saw a temple  
to a flying hero.

## *A Small Beginning*

We wish our creations  
to have sensations.

But can a robot smile?  
And style is soon exhausted  
words become vacuous,  
like the clangings of a rock  
in a jar,  
the soul in the picture escapes  
when you see it often enough.

Parrots talk  
apes rage  
pigeons find their homes  
across wide seas  
snakes slither  
elephants remember.

Machines repeat  
words and images fail.



## *Uncovering*

In our beginnings  
is our meaning hidden.  
But our coverings  
hide us from ourselves.  
The end of our journeys  
is to see ourselves  
in our true form.

Sleepy  
with the warmth of the covers  
it feels easier  
just to watch  
to know and not to be the one  
who gets transformed.

The king saw Urvashi  
by the lightening in the sky.  
Disrobed  
she could not be caught;  
this is what the king found.

## *Seeking Answers*

Never ignore  
The gatekeepers of secret spaces;  
they demand homage.

Each survival  
rests on some  
destruction  
excepting that of endless images  
spawned between mirrors.

If you seek answers  
hold on to the rope:  
you might gain a life.

The seed carries the tree's secrets.  
The world is a game  
of information and paradox.  
Gods and women love  
what is mysterious.

## *Nachiketa's Dual*

Sorrowing for his father  
Nachiketa fasted for three nights  
and his dual spoke:

There is a path  
narrow as a razor's edge  
that leads to a landscape  
where the sun does not shine  
nor the moon and the stars  
nor these lightnings  
and much less this fire.

Here is an upside-down tree  
with the leaves resting on the ground  
climb it to the roots  
till you find the seed.

Take a chariot for your journey  
the driver will know the answer.

## *Quantum Implications*

Crawling the tear between being and becoming  
our exertions create vibrations  
that ease the path  
and change time past.

If the past is made of stone  
how can there be any freedom  
in our becoming?  
We make history when we observe  
the slashing of the fabric  
of time past and time future  
opens the window on freedom.

Connections bind us  
from time to non-time  
beyond the seven sounds  
of rivers  
bells  
brazen vessels  
wheels of carriage  
croakings of frogs  
rain  
the echo in the cavern.

## *Chance and Necessity*

Time or nature, chance or necessity?

Ripened by time  
driven by nature  
harried by fate  
we seek our meanings.

The inner eye is fixed  
where the fire is rubbed  
the wind is checked.

The snarer rules alone—  
there is no second—  
it is a living presence  
grasping without hands  
hasting without feet  
in different forms—  
a dark blue bee  
a green parrot  
with red eyes.

What is the chance  
that one can roll up the sky  
like a hide?

## *A Boy and his Dog*

The boy hunted with his faithful dog.  
They sought spaces beyond the jungle  
stamped new trails  
swam in forest ponds  
chased birds across flowering pastures  
winked at death.

Why should I be afraid, the boy asked.  
Alive, we think about the time  
when we are no more  
when the roses have been replaced by silk  
when the earth has lost its fragrance  
when the shadow has fallen.  
We are the walking dead.

He played with guns  
and he died of a gunshot.  
At the funeral his mother consoled  
the mourners for their own losses.

The dog searched for the boy everywhere  
and with each new day he became weaker.  
His life ebbed out  
with the eleventh moon.  
The mother took the body at night  
to the cemetery  
and buried it  
next to the boy.



Subhash Kak has been called India's leading expressionist poet. He is the author of two other books of poetry, *The Conductor of the Dead and other poems* and *The London Bridge and other poems*. His poems have also appeared in leading journals of Hindi and English poetry in India and the West.

"For those with a feeling for South Asia but who do not live there and can only visit from time to time, it is difficult to capture at any given moment the sights, sounds and smells of the subcontinent. For them or, indeed, for someone who has never been to Kashmir, *The Secrets of Ishbar* is a 'must'. This anthology transports one immediately viscerally into the heartland of South Asia. Each poem has to be savoured and pondered, and each varies in subject-matter from the pleasant to the disturbing. Colours, images, and aromas are evoked with a poignant simplicity. . . . Every poem in the volume has a precious quality."

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